Swords, Wars, and Goldsmithing: Benvenuto Cellini and Masculinity in Sixteenth-Century Italy

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Born in 1500, Benvenuto Cellini was one of the world's most renowned Renaissance artists. As a goldsmith and a sculptor, his works became well-known masterpieces. In his autobiography, *The Life of Benvenuto the Son of Giovanni Cellini Written by Himself in Florence*, Cellini detailed his experiences and actions as an artist, fighter, and man living in the sixteenth century. While Cellini states his purpose for writing the autobiography is to describe his achievements in art, there is a great deal of violence in *The Life*, much of which Benvenuto instigates. As shown by *The Life*, in 16th century Italy, aggression—if justified—was seen as a sign of masculinity in artists, and justification for such aggression could come through communal, political, or religious approval. This essay examines how violence could be justified in the sixteenth century as a form of masculinity. First, the article takes a brief look into the work of historians on Cellini and masculinity. Afterward, the discussion moves to the three ways in which violence could be justified: communally, politically, and religiously, each of which are paired with examples from *The Life*.

Born in Florence in 1500, Benvenuto Cellini would grow to become simultaneously one of the most famous and infamous Renaissance artists[2]. As a sculptor and goldsmith, his work went nearly unparalleled. He entered challenges against artists such as Michelangelo, a competition in which Cellini was the victor[1]. Cellini created artwork for kings and worked for the papacy[1]. One of his most famous works of art is his statue of Perseus standing with the head of Medusa, a piece of art which still stands today in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Despite his incredible talents as an artist, his violence and the crimes he committed in sixteenth-century Italy, which he recorded in his autobiography, are equally remembered along with his immense skill. In fact, Cellini began to work on *The Life* after being sentenced to four years in prison in 1557. Throughout *The Life*, Cellini admits to dozens of violent crimes—including murders—but his sentencing in 1557 was for the nonviolent crime of sodomy[3].

First, we turn to the study of Cellini himself, both as an artist and as a man. In William Caferro's book, *Contesting the Renaissance*, Caferro examines the way which historians have viewed the Renaissance over time. In it, he notes that Cellini is commonly mentioned in sections of historical text as an "individual." Caferro even notes that Jacob Burckhardt, a Swiss historian from the nineteenth century who studied the Renaissance, described Cellini as a "whole man," who could "do all and dares do all, and who carries his measure in himself."[4] Historians have used Cellini as a way to discuss the behaviors and practices of artists, as *The Life* gave many insights to the daily practices of Renaissance artists. Art historian Beth Holman used Cellini and his artistic competition against Giovanni Bernardi to stress the point that competition for artists was multifaceted. Cellini and Bernardi competed against each other in a smithing contest where they were both to design a medal of Pope Clement VII. While there was a monetary prize involved with winning the contest, the pride won by the victor was far more significant. In addition, the Pope's attention on the contest allowed for Cellini or Bernardi to win the Pope's favor. Thus, competitions among artists in the Renaissance were a way to practice one's skill while simultaneously stressing the artist's honor and

helping establish or strengthen routes of patronage[1].

Cellini and his actions continue to mystify modern historians; indeed, this article is not the first to look at Benvenuto Cellini and the way which *The Life* can be used in the discussion of masculinity. Margaret Gallucci looked directly at Cellini's Life in 2003 for her book *Benvenuto Cellini: Sexuality, Masculinity, and Artistic Identity in Renaissance Italy*[5]. The book looked at Cellini's autobiography and analyzed it as a piece of literature. However, looking at Cellini's Life through the lens of gender and sexuality studies has been critiqued. Paul Oppenheimer's review of Gallucci's book made clear the stance which opposes this method of interpretation. For example, Oppenheimer disagreed with Gallucci's argument that Cellini "fashioned" himself through his autobiography, feeling as though the argument lacked evidence[3]. More generally, Oppenheimer questioned whether or not Cellini's *Life* could even be used to study how men of the Renaissance interpreted gender and its stereotypes as it had not "been invented in the sixteenth century." Oppenheimer seemingly ignored the ability of a person to act within a social construct even in a time period when the construct had yet to be defined. However, in an essay which focuses on masculinity in Cellini's Life, it is important to note the criticism of this kind of interpretation.

Now, we turn to the study of masculinity in the Renaissance and, more specifically, how artists fit into the historical discussion. Cristelle Baskins looked into masculinity through art depicting Scipio, the Roman general nicknamed Scipio Africanus in the second Punic war[6]. Baskins stressed that masculinity was something which was formed over time, as demonstrated by fifteenth-century Tuscan artwork. Manhood was signaled by moving past boyhood and its impulses. Baskins' work on Tuscan artists of the fifteenth century and their use of art to demonstrate how masculinity was formed lends itself well to the discussion of sixteenth-century Tuscan artist Cellini.

A discussion on medieval masculinity would be incomplete without acknowledging the work of Ruth Mazo Karras. Similar to Baskins, Karras' book *From Boys to Men* addressed the idea of masculinity being the opposite of being a boy[7]. While it has been common historical thought to imagine masculinity as the opposite of femininity, Karras argued that masculinity was additionally separate from beasthood and boyhood. Competition, Karras noted, was important in forming one's masculinity, as it demonstrated oneself as superior to others. This aligns well with what Holman noted in her argument about Cellini and his artistic competitions[1]. Karras argued additionally that masculinity in the medieval period did not take on merely one shape. Instead, what was defined as masculine could change based on region, time, and even profession. Karras determined that those who worked in craft workshops defined masculinity differently than those who were professional fighters or scholars. From such evaluation, this argument must acknowledge that the masculine violence which Cellini described and justified in *The Life* were not necessarily applicable to those outside of his career field. Similarly, Sonya Rose addressed masculinity in historical thought[8]. Unintentionally addressing Oppenheimer's critique, Rose noted that, while the term masculinity has not always existed, it was and is a constructive, formed force. Directly addressing Karras' work, Rose expounded on how becoming masculine in the Middle Ages meant demonstrating that one was not a boy. Rose wrote about masculinity, stating, "It [was] a status that must be tested and proved." Cellini's autobiography demonstrated this point well, as Cellini frequently tested and proved his masculinity through artistic competition, as demonstrated by Holman's work, and physical competition, including violence.

To further understand discussions of masculinity and Cellini, it must be noted that the source of Cellini's *Life* is both a historical and literary text. Stanley Brandes also looked into masculinity and sexuality, albeit in Andalusian folklore. Andalusia is a region in southern Spain with geographic and cultural

similarities to Cellini's region. Brandes made it clear that not all individuals can directly interpret masculinity in the same way as the men of Andalusia did in folklore; in fact, not all men within Andalusia would be able to relate to his interpretation of masculinity within his literature of study. However, the way which masculinity was represented in Andalusian folklore seemingly applied to a large portion of the Andalusian male population that created these stories[9]. Similarly, while Cellini's description of masculinity in *The Life* may not have been the experience of every man in Renaissance Italy, it likely was representative of the attitudes of some Renaissance artists of the sixteenth century.

What is missed in these discussions of masculinity, even when the discussion of masculinity involves the role which violence played, is a discussion of the justification of these violent acts. Although Rose did discuss violence and its importance in masculinity, her discussion emphasized that violence could be used to enforce masculine norms or used to subvert them[8]. Throughout *The Life*, Cellini describes his extraordinarily violent life, one which involves swordfights, verbal attacks, slingshots, and gunfire, all of which are surrounded by very masculine descriptions of Benvenuto and his cohorts. Cellini was always biased in his own favor, so, as Gallucci noted, it must be understood that every section of the book may not exactly represent reality. It's also important to note that Cellini wrote his autobiography over a period of several years and recounted events from decades earlier, so the described events could be somewhat misrepresented by his necessary forgetfulness. Finally, the edition read for this essay is a translation, meaning that there may be a linguistic gap causing bias. Despite this, Cellini's tone and message remain in the text, and his discussion of masculinity, even if not directly touched upon, can be interpreted.

The first route of justification of violent actions, resulting in them being identified as masculine, was communal, as society can decide on whether or not behavior is acceptable. The earliest example of violence in *The Life* was portrayed by Giovanni Cellini, Benvenuto Cellini's father, when he struck his young son to make sure he would remember seeing a salamander, claiming that, "as far as we know for certain no one has ever seen one before." After a kiss and a payment from his father for forgiveness, Benvenuto finds his father's action to be acceptable, as it was justified by his remembrance of the event. As was discussed in Rose's chapter, masculinity was associated with age and domination[8]. Through this early example of masculine violence, Cellini demonstrated his father's dominant role over him—one which was earned by his age and his position of power in the household. This idea of the father's role within the family was established not by either of the Cellini men but rather the larger Tuscan society.

Another example of communal acceptance of violence is seen through a quarrel between Giovanni Cellini and his former pupil, Piero. Piero insulted Giovanni by saying that Benvenuto Cellini is wasting his time on, "all this fifing nonsense," in reference to Cellini's skills as a musician. Cellini claims throughout *The Life* that playing music was an activity he did solely because it pleased his dad greatly. Giovanni Cellini and Piero then verbally attacked each other, both claiming that one day the other's son will come begging to their own superior son for assistance. About a month after the fight, Piero, while surrounded by a crowd, mocked Giovanni. Suddenly, the floor collapsed in under him, killing Piero. The community, after either hearing or seeing Piero's death, viewed the incident as proof that Giovanni was justified in his quarrel with his former student, and Piero was not. The defense of the Cellini name came from the communal interpretation of the likely random collapse, which defended the honor of Giovanni and Benvenuto, as the honor of the son was brought in during the verbal altercation between Giovanni and Piero.

Importantly, some violent acts were not justified by the communal group around them, as seen when Cellini meets Piero Torrigiano, a man who used to study with Michelangelo

Buonarroti. Piero claims to have, "lost my temper more than usual, and, clenching my fist, gave [Michelangelo] such a punch on the nose that I felt the bone and cartilage crush like a biscuit. So that fellow will carry my signature till he dies." This incident demonstrates Karras' point that masculinity involved rivalry in the medieval period, and defeating another man was a means through which a man could demonstrate his masculinity. Due to Cellinis' respect for Michelangelo, he finds this statement to be insulting, and he develops a deep hatred for Piero Torrigiano. After all, Piero was the student of Michelangelo, and this aggression was thus against Piero's superior. While Rose denoted that some acts of violence were used to subvert masculine norms (one of which required the master to be more masculine than the pupil), Cellini found this incident inappropriate against such a master as Michelangelo. To Benvenuto, this story which Piero told—which was laced with masculine language—did not make Piero appear more masculine, and he did not find Piero's actions to be justified.

Approval for violent actions can also come through political routes, which was a means through by some Renaissance men could try to demonstrate their masculinity. When Cellini was sixteen and his brother was fourteen, his brother started a fight with a twenty-year-old. While this fight reflects the cultural examples of masculinity which Karras described, as the two young Cellini men were rebelling against boyhood by demonstrating their strength over an older person, this fight proved to be rather political. Cellini describes the fight in very masculine terms, stating, "my brother attacked with such boldness that he wounded [his opponent] badly," and later states that such bold actions will make him an excellent soldier. After the wounded man's family attacked Cellini's younger brother with slingshots, causing him to collapse, Cellini joined his brother in the fight against the family. The Eight, a board of magistrates of law in Florence, banished the family of adversaries for "a number of years." The wording surrounding the description of the family implies that they weakly attacked a valiant young boy and continued to attack even after he passed out. The Cellini brothers received only six months of banishment at "a distance of ten miles from Florence," showing that their attack was more justified than that of the family, as their attack was more forceful and purposefully aggressive rather than the needless and cowardly attacks of the opposing family, demonstrating that even the government can support one's masculinity in some instances.

One of the most powerful ways in which one could signal their masculinity through violence was justification by religion. There were two distinct routes of religious validation—through the Pope and through God. Cellini lived through and met several popes during his lifetime. While France and Rome were at war from 1521 to 1529, Cellini fought to protect Pope Clement VII. In one incident, Cellini aimed his gun and shot a man so well that the man "was cut in two." At this moment in *The Life*, Cellini fell to his knees and begged the Pope to absolve him of all homicides he committed in the name of the Church. Pope Clement blessed him, forgiving him of all homicides, "[Cellini] had ever committed and all those [Cellini] would commit in the service of the Apostolic Church." After being blessed, Benvenuto continued to commit justified killing in the name of the Church, lacing the story with ever-growing masculine language. This demonstrates the attitude of Burckhardt on Cellini, since in this section Benvenuto claims to be just as good a soldier as he was an artist. Whether Cellini truly was an "individual" matters less than the fact that Cellini fits Burckhardt's description that he could, "do all and dares do all."[4]

Another example of the Pope justifying violence is seen later in the book, when Cellini comes to Pope Clement VII again, after Cellini admitted to not receiving communion or going to confession for several years. After admitting to all his sins, the Pope is quoted as saying, "I absolve you from every fault you have ever been guilty of." This vague blessing was, in Cellini's opinion, the Pope's justification of all of Cellini's previous actions, both nonviolent

and violent. Although Cellini would commit more sins after this point, Cellini's retelling of this story gives insight to how Cellini wanted the world to view him after reading *The Life*. He claimed that the Pope himself had justified his actions—even those which were shameful and violent.

As described by Cellini, early on in the papacy of Paul III, Cellini came to the Pope to be pardoned for his murder of Pompeo, an opposing artist who he believed had harmed his career[1]. In this, he was begging the papacy to justify his violent action, and if he were to receive justification, it would provide Cellini a platform to restore his honor, which, in the sixteenth century, was inseparably linked to his masculine identity. When Pope Paul III spoke of Benvenuto's actions against Pompeo, he stated, "I know nothing of Pompeo's death, but plenty of the arguments used to justify Benvenuto." When a friend of Pompeo attempted to dissuade Paul III from pardoning Benvenuto, the Pope responded, "Men like Benvenuto, who are unique as far as their art is concerned, as not to be subjected to the law—especially not him, for I know what good cause he had." This line from *The Life* is an outstanding example of masculinization through justified violence, and particularly how religion could be deeply involved in the justification of violence and the restoration of honor. However, this example and the language which it was presented in also demonstrates how this particular example may have been exclusive to artists.

Despite the Pope being the most obvious route for religious justification in Italy, it is demonstrated in *The Life* that validation could come directly from God. Cellini had an ongoing disagreement with Pantasilea, a woman whom he had no interest in making his partner. Cellini housed a man named Luigi Pulici whom Cellini banned from being involved with Pantasilea. Luigi swore to God that he would never attempt to flirt with her, and asked God to strike him down if he did. Disobeying Cellini's command, Luigi flirted with Pantasilea, insulting Benvenuto in the process. This led to a fight between the two men in which Cellini attempted to stab and kill Luigi, but Cellini failed. After several weeks of Luigi roaming free, his horse threw him, causing him to break his legs and die. Benvenuto declares that Luigi "fulfilled the vow he had made...to God," and that, "we can see how God reckons up good and evil, and gives every man what he deserves."

In summary, Benvenuto Cellini's *Life* gives insight into the actions of a Renaissance artist. While Cellini claims on multiple occasions that the purpose of *The Life* was to exalt his art, it also demonstrated values of masculinity. Historians have provided many sources on masculinity, violence, and Cellini himself. What is widely overlooked, however, is the detail of justification which must occur for a violent action to be masculinized. *The Life* exposes that, in sixteenth-century Italy, violence was a route through which an artist could signal their masculinity as long as the aggression was justified, and *The Life* expressed that validation for violent acts could come through either communal, political, or religious means. Notably, there were dozens of examples of justified violence in *The Life* not mentioned here, which reflects both the magnitude of which this idea was repeated and the amount of violent crimes which Cellini committed. Cellini, who wanted to be immortalized by his works, lived in infamy through the violent actions portrayed in his autobiography, which has given historians a clearer picture of Renaissance Italy through his descriptions of daily life, art, and crime.

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